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SUBJECT: CdH OFFICIAL ON PARTY PHILOSOPHY AND ITS CHANCES IN THE  
REGIONAL ELECTION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The cdH is a center-left party that is the third largest in Wallonia and Brussels regions. Formerly known as the Christian Democratic party, it puts an emphasis on values and on individual fulfillment as a major guide for decision making. In the upcoming regional elections, the party is featuring education and a response to the economic crisis in its program. According to Laurent de Briey, the director of its in-house think tank, the Center for Economic, Political and Social Studies, the cdH is likely to poll about the same number of votes as it did in 2004, between a weakened Socialist Party and a surging Ecolo group. De Briey says the issue of division of power between the regions and federal government and international questions do not strongly influence voters in Wallonia. He believes that the ambitions of Guy Verhofstadt to become Prime Minister are the greatest threat to survival of the current coalition government until the next scheduled elections in 2011. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On April 14, Poloff met with Laurent de Briey, director of the Center for Economic, Political and Social Studies, the in-house think tank and policy development center for the francophone political party, the Centre Democratique Humaniste (cdH). The party is the third largest in the Wallonia and Brussels regions. Until 2002, the party was known as the Christian Democratic party. Poloff asked what the name change meant to the party, and de Briey explained that it corresponded to social and demographic changes in the French-speaking community, as many voters had become not especially religious. Although Christian, mainly Catholic, voters are dominant among its supporters, the party wanted to be clear that its doors are open to others.

¶3. (SBU) The average cdH voter is an employee in the Qnon-profit sector, including Qwhite collarQ government employees like teachers. The party is competing with Ecolo for such voters. While the cdH shares the socialist skepticism of unbridled capitalism, the Socialist Party tends to attract more Qblue collarQ government employees in sectors such as transport and is stronger in larger cities with significant immigrant populations.

¶3. (SBU) The cdH is a center-left party, and participates in coalition governments as a partner with the Socialists in the Wallonia regional government and in many municipalities. De Briey distinguished the cdH philosophy from the Socialists by saying that while the Socialists put emphasis on group social and economic engineering, the cdH emphasis is on QvaluesQ and individual rights and responsibilities. Joelle Milquet is the partyQs public face and is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities in the federal government. She is second on the party list in the Brussels regional elections in June. According to Milquet, the party prefers to use the term QcenterQ rather than QpartyQ to describe itself in order to emphasize that it stands outside the traditional definitions of left and right. It is QdemocraticQ in its openness to all social groups and its desire for citizen involvement in decision making, for a consistent, not minimalist nor maximalist, state and for a dynamic but regulated market economy. It is QhumanistQ in that it believes each personQs happiness is the political priority, surpassing the interests of the

market, science and political power.

¶4. (SBU) In the upcoming elections, the party has chosen to put education reform first on its platform but is also focusing on the economic crisis and sustainable development. The party recently held a conference on the education issue, putting forth a number of concrete proposals in a lengthy policy document. The party is proud of the steps it has taken since 2004 to open secondary education to students of all abilities and class origins. Building on that, in a 47 page manifesto it proposes detailed strategies for:

- ¶A. Valuing the profession of teaching and strengthening the autonomy of teams of educators;
- ¶B. Enhancing the quality of education and fighting against student failure;
- ¶C. Offering a quality school to all students while fighting against dualization of students and schools;
- ¶D. Transforming technical and vocational education into real options for student's futures;
- ¶E. Improving the efficiency of schools for better governance;
- ¶F. Enhancing the quality of life in schools; and,
- ¶G. Developing the education of social workers.

¶5. (SBU) To ameliorate the effects of the economic crisis, the party proposes to rejuvenate the economy through public investment, not only by stimulating consumption. It would build housing, promote the creation of green jobs and improve services to the public. The last includes especially the aging population and young parents who would benefit from more places in nursery schools. In general, de Briey says, the party wants to put service to the public first, through a better functioning state. It also supports a more integrated Europe.

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¶6. (SBU) De Briey handicapped the upcoming regional elections by saying that the Socialists will retain their first place position in Wallonia, but will lose support as the Ecolo party surges. The Socialists suffer from disillusionment among the Walloon electorate over matters such as the problems at Fortis Bank. Depending on the exact vote totals, the outcome of the election could be either a Mouvement Reformateur (MR) or PS coalition or a PS-CdH-Ecolo grouping. The former outcome is less likely, he believes, because of the philosophical differences between the parties, even though the MR and Socialists coexist in the federal government coalition. The worst result, from the point of view of the cdH and its future ability to gather votes, would be an MR-Ecolo majority coalition, although that is only an outside possibility.

¶7. (SBU) Asked to comment on the role of the institutional division of powers among the regions and the federal government in the regional election, de Briey said it is not such an important issue. Francophone voters are mainly approaching the matter in reaction to Flemish dissatisfaction with the current regime. At heart, he said, the problem is one of budgets. Ultimately, he said, it will be more difficult for the regions to find a way to separate than to stay together. He expects the regions to obtain a maximum of autonomy within a Belgian shell.

¶8. (SBU) At the federal level, de Briey sees the Open VLD as the main danger to the continued existence of the current coalition government. As Guy Verhofstadt regains strength in the party, de Briey believes his supporters may want to bring down the government so that new elections would provide an opportunity for him to become prime minister at an early date. International questions are not at the forefront of the voters' minds either, he said. Such matters are not decided so much at the regional, party level as at the level of the federal cabinet of ministers. He said that the average cdH voter is certainly not a militarist, and does not see terrorism as a thing that affects Belgium specifically. Like most European parties, the cdH is happy to see the arrival of the Obama Administration in Washington.

BUSH